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Soviet Mines Maim Afghan Rebels

2 Million Bits of Death: 'Never Been Anything Like It'

By BARRY RENFREW, *Associated Press*

MOUNT SOONI, Afghanistan— Making a last grim joke about coming back legless, the guerrilla picked up a long stick and moved ahead of the column to ensure that the way was clear of Soviet anti-personnel mines.

"When a *moujahedeen* steps on a mine, he loses his leg," said the guerrilla, with a graphic chop of his hand across his thigh. His fellow *moujahedeen* (holy warriors) laughed and jokingly invited a foreign guest to lead the way.

For the rest of the day loud explosions rocked the valley as the guerrilla scouts cleared the way of mines.

Soviet forces have littered hundreds of thousands of deadly camouflaged mines along the Afghan-Pakistani border to try to stop the movement of Islamic guerrilla units and supply columns.

Besides the guerrillas, thousands of civilian refugees have been treated in Pakistani hospitals for lost limbs and other injuries.

Up to 2 Million

Western intelligence experts estimate Soviet forces have dropped or planted up to 2 million mines along the border since they invaded Afghanistan in late 1979 and installed the country's current Communist government.

"There's never been anything like it before and we know it is hitting the guerrillas hard," said one intelligence official, speaking only on condition of anonymity.

The Soviet mine-laying campaign has centered on about 250 mountain passes along the 900-mile border used by the guerrillas to enter Afghanistan from refuges in Pakistan. Huge numbers of mines also have been strewn in areas inside Afghanistan where guerrilla forces operate.

Many of the mines used in the Soviet campaign are designed to sever arms or legs rather than kill outright. This actually does more to hamper the resistance, because an injured man takes several more guerrillas out of combat while they attempt to get him to medical aid.

What the Soviets use mainly are

small plastic devices called butterfly mines that can be dropped by the hundreds from helicopters and low-flying aircraft. The mines are shaped like sycamore seeds, and their wings enable them to gently rotate down to the ground.

The mines are encased in green and brown plastic that blends into the landscape and makes detection difficult. They are also designed to remain active for years and can even be effective when dropped in rivers.

The butterfly mines and other more powerful mines were specially developed for use in Afghanistan, the Western intelligence officials say. The Soviet Union has an estimated 115,000 troops in Afghanistan, too few to blanket the wild mountainous country, and the mines replace troops that would otherwise be needed to guard the border, they said.

Many Crossing Points

Guerrilla commanders acknowledge that the mines have inflicted losses on their forces and caused some problems for their supply columns. Still, the border is too long and there are too many crossing points for the mine campaign to stop the convoys, they said.

Rahmat Saed, a guerrilla commander in Afghanistan's Kunar province, said most guerrilla losses and casualties are inflicted by aircraft raids and the mines.

"Everywhere there are our men who had their legs or their feet or their hands cut off by the mines," Saed said. "The mines kill and hurt many of us."

The guerrillas have little or no medical facilities and the only hope for guerrillas wounded by mines or other weapons is to be carried over the mountains to Pakistan.

Guerrilla commanders in Kunar Province say they have little to counter the mines but the sharp eyes, courage and willingness of some men to lead the way when moving through mine-infested areas. When a mine is found, it is usually picked up very cautiously and hurled against nearby rocks to detonate it.

The guerrilla commanders say they want modern mine detectors to help their men find the mines. However, such equipment would be useless because the mines are plastic and would not register on metal-detecting equipment.

Soviet aircraft and ground forces are constantly laying new mines and the guerrillas never know when the way will be clear. Even the most remote mountain trails must be checked every time a guerrilla unit moves through the area.

The mines have inflicted many civilian casualties in Afghanistan, particularly among the tens of thousands of people fleeing the country. Afghan refugees must use the same mountain passes as the guerrillas and they have none of the fighters' experience at detecting the mines.